

VZCZCXRO0414
PP RUEHDE RUEHDIR
DE RUEHYN #0907/01 1390516

ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 190516Z MAY 07
FM AMEMBASSY SANAA

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7105
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHKH/AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM PRIORITY
RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI PRIORITY 0015
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHMFSS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RHMFSS/CJTF HOA PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SANAA 000907

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/09/2017

TAGS: MOPS PGOV PHUM PINR PREL PTER

SUBJECT: SAADA HISTORY: HUSSEIN AL-HOUTHI - PARLIAMENTARIAN TURNED INSURGENT

REF: A. 04 SANAA 001936
IB. 04 SANAA 001962
IC. 04 SANAA 002225
ID. 04 SANAA 002006
IE. 04 SANAA 002421
IF. SANAA 000226

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Classified By: DCM Nabeel Khoury, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

I1. (C) SUMMARY: Since 2004, the ROYG has fought three wars in the Saada governorate with the al-Houthis, with each round more intense and prolonged than the last. History is key to understanding why this conflict began and continues to reemerge. The roots of the conflict lie with the late Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi, the former member of Parliament and inspiration of the first rebellion in 2004. His evolution and radicalization mirror the conflict itself, which continues to gain strength as those supporting the al-Houthis grow in number. His beliefs began through his experiences as a student in Sudan, grew into an ideology as a teacher, and developed into a movement as a rebel leader. Post has collected views from contacts who had direct communication with Hussein al-Houthi, and presents them here as a way of understanding the roots of the current conflict. END SUMMARY

Parliamentarian

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I2. (C) From 1993-1997, Hussein al-Houthi was a member of Parliament, as a representative of the al-Haq party. According to post contacts, President Saleh promised al-Houthi his support in 1997 if he distanced himself from his party and aligned with the ruling GPC party. Al-Houthi thus split from al-Haq, only to be met with empty promises aimed at keeping him under government control in Sanaa, and away from Saada. The President's office subsequently campaigned against al-Houthi, causing him to lose his seat during the 1997 parliamentary elections to another GPC member.

Student

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I3. (C) Shortly thereafter, the relatively young al-Houthi received a government scholarship to complete his masters and doctoral studies in Sudan. In 2001, after obtaining his graduate degree, but before completing his doctoral dissertation in Islamic studies, family health issues caused

him to return to Saada. During his stay, his scholarship was taken away by the government and he could not return to Khartoum to complete his studies. While in his home village of Marran, a powerful sheikh jailed 14 villagers due to a dispute over a water well. Hussein al-Houthi saw this as a grave injustice, and felt it was his duty to stand-up for his weak and poor compatriots. (NOTE: The al-Houthis are not tribal, but live under the protection of tribal sheikhs as descendants of the Prophet Mohammed. END NOTE)

Teacher

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¶4. (C) Soon thereafter, Hussein al-Houthi joined the Believing Youth, or "Shabab al-Mo'min" in Arabic. He began to host cultural forums for youths, assembling large numbers of followers attracted to his charismatic speaking style. He stressed the importance of loyalty to the group and obedience to the leader. He slowly began breaking away from the Shabab, criticizing them for only being an educational association, and not rising to the next necessary step of becoming a movement. He thus took his disciples and decided to transform his thoughts into an ideology, to bring about a movement. He believed that all of the independent Zaydi scholars in Saada needed to be united under one umbrella. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 gave him the fuel he was searching for to boast popular interest in his ideas. Al-Houthi and his followers, who still have not established a formal name or leadership structure, began to be known as "harakat al-shi'ar," or the movement of the slogan. (NOTE: See ref F for an explanation of Zaydi Islam and the particular brand practiced by the al-Houthis. END NOTE)

The Movement of the Slogan

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¶5. (C) Capitalizing upon popular fervor against the invasion of Iraq, al-Houthi followers began taking up the slogan, "Death to America, Death to Israel." The slogan also stood as an indirect criticism of the ROYG, which the movement painted as a corrupt stooge of the United States and Israel.

¶6. (C) Al-Houthi's following continued to expand in 2002-2003. Some were sent to Sanaa to chant the movement's slogan in the Grand Mosque of the capital. The ROYG took a firm stance against these chanters, arresting approximately 800 individuals throughout numerous Friday prayer ceremonies, further fueling anti-government sentiments.

Saada

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¶7. (C) Al-Houthi took advantage of every opportunity to politically attack President Saleh with the slogan, whether in Sanaa or Saada. An event which sparked greater tension between the two men occurred when the President passed through Saada on his way to Hajj pilgrimage in Mecca. Al-Houthi sent protesters to chant the movement's anti-American slogan outside the Saada mosque where Saleh had stopped to pray. After prayers, the President attempted to give a speech, but was impeded by three men loudly chanting the slogan.

Letter

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¶8. (C) In response, Saleh sent a letter to Hussein al-Houthi summoning him to Sanaa, to which al-Houthi agreed. Meanwhile, in June (2004) Saleh visited Washington, DC and upon his return, sent another letter to al-Houthi summoning him again to Sanaa. Al-Houthi agreed once more, but was intercepted on his way by government troops, who were sent to address an unrelated tribal conflict. Three of these troops were killed reportedly, while trying to break-up a drug

smuggling confrontation in the province. Saleh believed that al-Houthi was behind the death of the three soldiers.

Fighting Erupts

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¶9. (C) Following this incident, al-Houthi and his followers took to the mountains of Marran in Saada. The ROYG asked for Hussein al-Houthi to surrender, but he refused, setting off the first armed confrontations with the ROYG in 2004. Hussein was killed on September 10, 2004, after approximately 10 weeks of fighting (ref A).

Continuous Fighting

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¶10. (C) The death of Hussein al-Houthi in 2004 marked for the ROYG the end of the conflict in Saada. Uprisings in 2005 and 2007, however, led by Hussein's father Badr al-Din and his brother Abdul-Malik, respectively, demonstrated that the rupture between the al-Houthi movement and the ROYG only grew deeper. Reliable DAO contacts indicate that fighters in support of al-Houthi now number more than 4,000. On April 14, President Saleh told Ambassador that more than 3,000 government troops had so far been killed or injured in the fight. Since that date, casualties on both sides have only increased, with more intense fighting displacing thousands within Saada. According to a range of contacts, this latest conflict, which broke out in January, has spread to include tribes that were not previously involved, but who feel wronged by Saleh, and are taking advantage of the al-Houthis' uprising to put pressure on Saleh. (NOTE: Tribal and Salafi involvement will be reported septel. END NOTE)

COMMENT

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¶11. (C) COMMENT: Despite Hussein al-Houthi's anti-American slogans, observers who are in contact with the al-Houthis believe that Hussein was, and now Abdul-Malik is and continues to be devoted to maintaining a republican regime. Their aim, according to these contacts, is not to return the rule of the imam, as the ROYG claims, but rather to have peace, security, and prosperity in Saada and all of Yemen. These observers claim that the al-Houthis utilized an

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anti-Western slogan to unite their community against injustice, which they believe is exemplified by the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the American "occupation" of Iraq. Despite this, however, their primary focus is on their own country, and specifically to the province of Saada, which is notoriously neglected by the ROYG and is deeply impoverished.

¶12. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: The evolution of the al-Houthi phenomenon suggests that this is a classic political and personal struggle between a regional leader who feels wronged and betrayed, and a strong ruler who feels inappropriately challenged. The struggle has expanded with each round of fighting to include those who feel they have little left to lose, and are ready to use religion to further their political goals. Analyzing the conflict from this angle provides at least a degree of hope that what began as a political dispute between two formidable adversaries can also be resolved by political means. The longer the conflict endures, however, and the more actors beyond the al-Houthi family become involved, the more difficult it becomes to reach such a settlement. END COMMENT

¶13. (U) MINIMIZE CONSIDERED FOR KHARTOUM

KRAJESKI